

# **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

Elizabeth (Liz) Delsandro

## **Abstract:**

Many young children with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty with social problem-solving. They may have difficulty reading a situation or problem; understanding how their spoken words and/or actions may impact others; recognizing available options for responding to a situation; and carrying out a solution to the situation. Through story-telling, scenarios depicting social dilemmas may be presented to young children with Asperger's Syndrome. The children may be given the responsibility of participating in some active problem-solving to achieve a more optimal conclusion to the story. Through Social Story-Telling, a series of three social dilemmas are presented and the children are invited to "make it better." They are encouraged to verbalize what they would say and/or do in a situation to "make it better." When the story is reread to the learners with their "make it better" responses, the ending to the story is positively impacted. The learners have actively contributed to the scenario and seem to feel empowered. In a sense, the learners have changed the direction of the characters interactions and the conclusion of the story. This strategy of Social Story-Telling also has a role-playing component. After rereading the story with personal contributions to "make it better," the children are encouraged to role-play a social dilemma or problem from the story. They readily enjoy role-playing the social dilemma in a "not-so-good" way. Then they are encouraged to role-play the scenario in a "better" way. It's incredible to see the children's verbal responses evolve over time. Through Social Story-Telling, qualitative improvements may be noted in the learners' performance. The learners may be more apt to actively participate in the story-telling, show interest in their peers' responses, contribute their verbal responses, and express a connection between events in the story

## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

Elizabeth (Liz) Delsandro

and that of events in their own lives. The stories are building upon their background knowledge and experiences by presenting scenarios that they may experience at school or in the community with a friend or peer. This Social Story-Telling strategy seems to resonate with young children with Asperger's Syndrome due to the highly visual nature (illustrations in the story), the development of the characters in the story, the consistent structure or format of the story (use of a basic formula for structuring the story and the delivery of the activity), the active participation component (verbal problem-solving and role-playing), and familiar story scenarios. The Social Story-Telling strategy can be used to create standard or electronic books to help facilitate children's understanding of social dilemmas and assist them in their journey of social problem-solving.

### **The Story:**

While working as a speech-language pathologist in the Iowa public schools during the 2006-2007 school year, I was interested in creating a weekly lesson that would actively engage young children with Asperger's Syndrome and high functioning autism. The learners were between 5 years and 8 years of age. Not only did I want to keep the children motivated to participate, but I wanted to help address a need that all of the learners were demonstrating on a daily basis. That need was the ability to problem-solve in social interactions with peers. How could I create a comfortable environment for these children to explore ways they could approach and/or understand a social situation? My way of thinking has clearly been impacted by the incredible work of Carol Gray and Michelle Garcia Winner.

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## **Thinking about Asperger's Syndrome and Autism:**

Every individual has his or her own unique interests, experiences, and learning style. Strong consideration of some of my learners' interests and learning styles helped frame the lessons I created for social problem solving. I informally considered the following factors:

- ✓ Interest in books and stories
- ✓ A need for sameness and routine
- ✓ Strength in learning through the visual channel
- ✓ Challenged by an overload of verbal information
- ✓ Interest in movies and cartoons
- ✓ Connectedness with established characters

### *Interest in books and stories:*

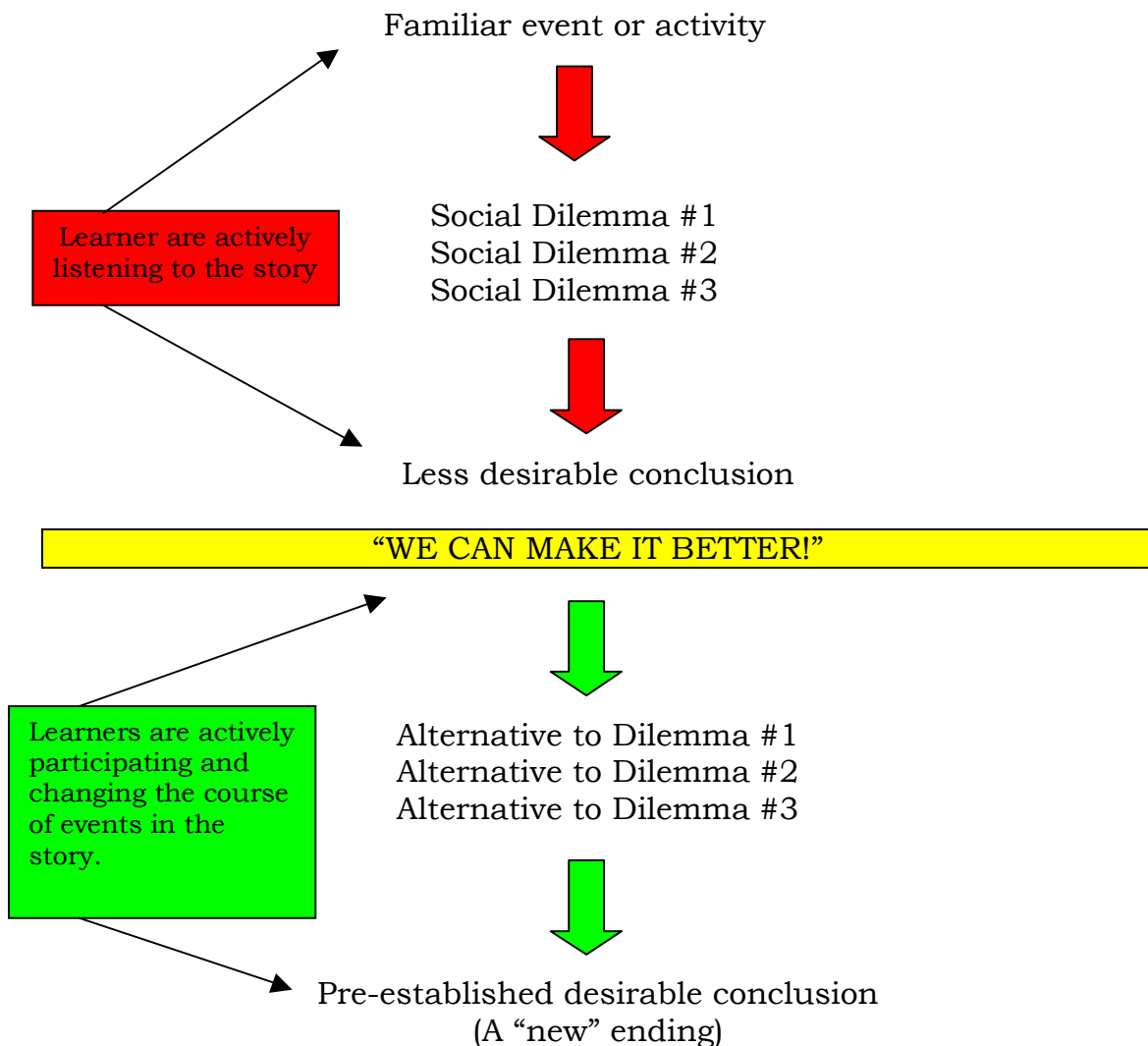
There was no doubt that my lessons were going to follow a story format. Most of my learners demonstrated an unsolicited interest in a variety of books. In very general terms a story presents a point of view, leads the reader with plot and a setting, develops characters, and establishes a theme. Across my lessons, the plot structure virtually remains consistent. Each lesson (a weekly story) is structured with an introduction of a familiar event or activity (e.g., fieldtrip, recess, etc.) where the setting is immediately established. Following the introduction, three social situations related to the event are presented to the learners. The social situations are in essence social dilemmas. Due the social dilemmas, the story results with a less desirable conclusion. The learners are charged with "We can make it better!"

### *A Need for sameness and routine:*

## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

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Many of my learners thrive in an environment that is structured. They benefit from use of schedules, calendars and scripts for example. I decided to create a social problem solving lesson (a weekly story) that has a general and structured framework. Please note that although a general framework for the lesson (a weekly story) was established, flexibility was built in to discourage learners from becoming too rigid in their expectations. The framework may be considered a basic formula, as follows:



## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

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### *Strength in learning through the visual channel:*

Because books can be highly visual and motivating for some learners, the weekly lessons evolved into short stories with simple illustrations and basic text. Because of some learners' difficulty with filtering out less important information (illustrations and/or written words), exhibited distractibility and attending to details of less importance; "to the point" or basic illustrations and text were used.

### *Challenged by an overload of verbal information:*

Some of the children participate and/or attend less when excessive spoken language is used. The text and questions paired with the story were intentionally kept simple and "to the point." I didn't want the lesson to focus how much information a learner could or could not process at a given time. The focus was to keep the learners actively engaged in some basic problem-solving.

### *Interest in movies and cartoons:*

Many of my learners expressed interest in watching movies and cartoons. They seemed to enjoy talking about upcoming movies, newly released movies, and classic movies. Some learners would repeat lines from their favorite movies and/or cartoons. I was thinking about how I could possibly take this intense interest and build it into a lesson for the learners. The idea of role-playing ("acting") was incorporated into the lesson.

### *Connectedness with established characters:*

Some of my learners are interested in specific characters from a book, a cartoon, and/or a movie. They were familiar with what their favorite characters looked like, what their characters might say, and how the characters might act. I wanted to introduce my learners to a small set of

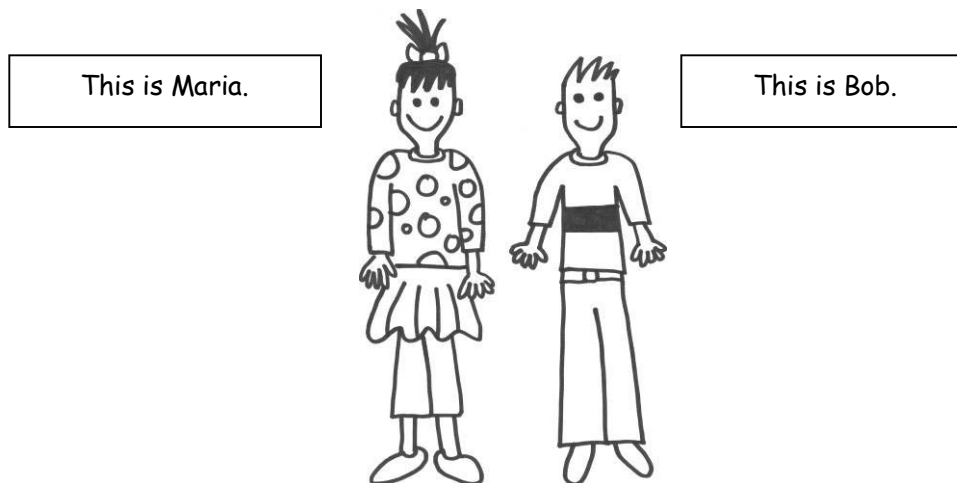
## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

Elizabeth (Liz) Delsandro

characters through the lessons (weekly stories). The learners quickly became interested in the two characters that played a role in each lesson (weekly stories).

### **Meeting the Characters:**

The characters of Bob and Maria were introduced to the learners on a weekly basis through a story. The learners demonstrated a strong interest in what Bob and Maria might do, say, and think in a story. It wasn't uncommon for a learner to say "I wonder what Bob and Maria are going to do today?" At times, I would see my learners in the halls throughout the week and they would ask me "Do we have Bob and Maria on Friday?" My learners were clearly interested in the established characters of the story.



The learners seemed to enjoy the series of stories. They became familiar and interested in the characters. From story to story, the learners started to realize that although the characters remained the same, the adventures of the characters changed. The learners were so interested in the characters of Bob and Maria, that I ended up drawing a picture of Bob and Maria on the large wipe-off board with accompanying written

## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

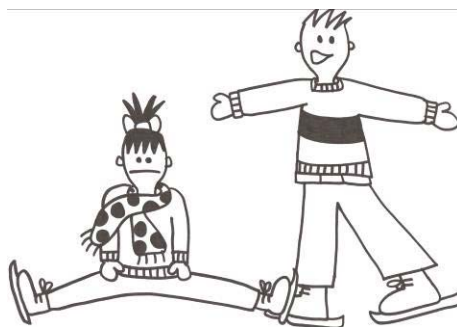
Elizabeth (Liz) Delsandro

messages such “Think about what Bob and Maria would do” or “Bob and Maria will see you when they get back from Spring Break.”

### **Introducing the Social Situations or Dilemmas:**

Across lessons (weekly stories), a “formula” was used. Three social situations or dilemmas were introduced in each lesson (weekly story). Typically, one character in the story demonstrated a hard time socially interacting in an acceptable manner. The one character (e.g., Bob) might have said or done something that negatively impacted the other character (e.g., Maria). The learners were encouraged to indicate whether this was acceptable behavior or “not-so-good” behavior through gestures (e.g., thumbs up or thumbs down). Initially, the use of gestures was paired with a verbal message or sound effect (e.g., something like “Whew-hew” for acceptable behavior and a buzzer sound for a “not-so-good” behavior). I quickly noticed that this was not the way to go, because the sound effects became the center of the story and were distracting. To say the least, we went back to gestures only which helped maintain the learners’ attention to the story, without sacrificing their participation or opportunity to provide feedback.

Maria falls and  
Bob makes fun  
of Maria.



Each story was paired with leading questions (presented by an adult) to help learners consider what a person may be doing, saying, and thinking in response to the social dilemma.

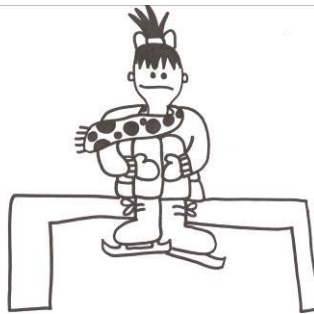
## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

Elizabeth (Liz) Delsandro

### **A Less Preferred Ending:**

Each story concluded with a less preferred ending. The characters of the story (Bob and Maria) often ended up going their separate ways with some hard feelings. But, hope arose when the learners received a change to “rewrite” some of the story. They are encouraged with “We can make it better.” Some of the learners would say something like “That’s OK. We can make it better!” unprompted and with enthusiasm.

Maria sits on the bench at the ice skating rink by herself.



### **A “Re-Write” of the Story:**

The learners were encouraged to approach each of the three dilemmas in the story to “make it better.” Initially, I thought the learners would be tentative about how to do this. However, with some framed questions and some modeling, the learners were eager to contribute their ideas. With sticky notes in hand, I wrote down the learners’ responses and posted them directly on the corresponding page. This process was repeated for each of the three social dilemmas. Over time, learners’ responses started to evolve. There were some changes noted in the timing of some learners’ responses, the length of their responses, and the content of their responses. Learners had the option to pass, but please note that there were not many occasions that this liberty was exercised by the learners. It was exciting to see how learners became increasingly interested in actively participating in this portion of the lesson over time!



## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

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Over time, the management of lots of sticky notes (each sticky note contained a single learner's response) became challenging. To remedy this, a large chart was created (a three column table, one column for each social dilemma) to contain all of the learner's contributions. The learners seemed to enjoy seeing their ideas being put on paper.

### **A Second Read of the Story:**

Once the learners' contributions were completed for each of the three social dilemmas, the story was reread. The revised story was reread with the learner's contributions. The learners demonstrated excitement when their responses were mentioned in the story.

### **A "New" Ending:**



A new ending (a more preferred ending) was waiting for the learners as they moved through the story. The idea was that the learners' contributions or rewrite of the story (specifically transforming the social dilemmas into more preferred behavior) helped impact a change for the better. Please note that the new ending was predetermined but general enough to fit in well with the learners' contributions.

## **Social Story-Telling: A Strategy for Encouraging Social Problem Solving in Children with Asperger's Syndrome**

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### **A Role-Playing Component:**

Following the second read of the story, a learner is invited to role-play a social dilemma or scenario with the instructor. Initially, the learner and adult role-play the scenario in the “not-so-good” way. The learner plays the character who exhibits inappropriate behavior and the adult responds to the behavior. Then, the learner and the adult role-played the scenario in the “make-it-better” way. To my surprise, the learners were very eager to participate in the role-playing component of the lesson. Thus, a turn-taking visual support was put in place to designate who (usually two students) was going to role-play selected scenarios each week.

### **Integrating Lessons in the “Real World”:**

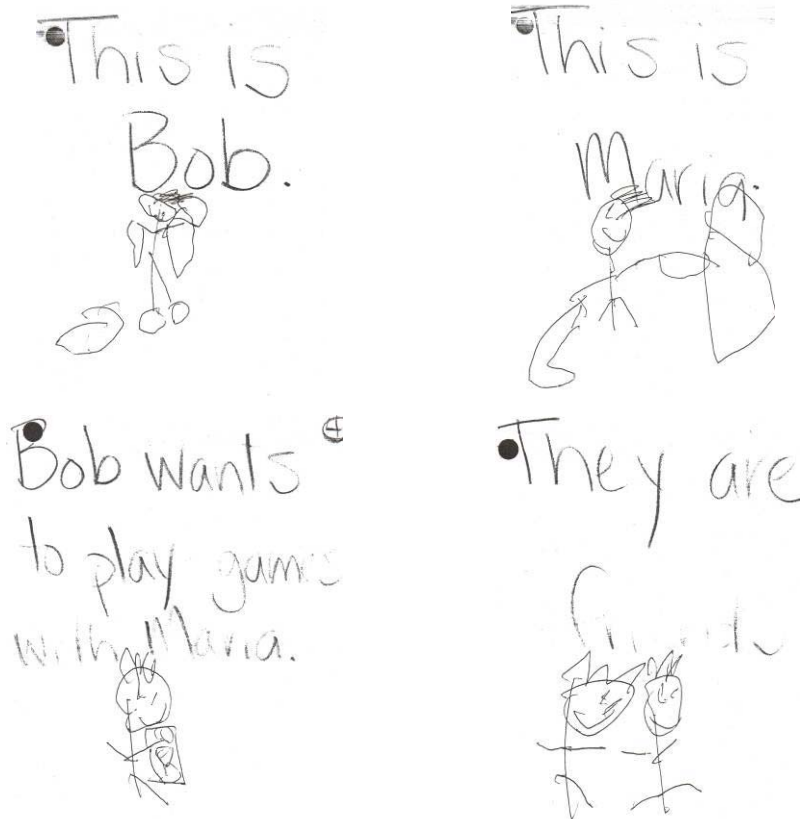
It was important to help learners bridge the gap between the weekly lesson and their school day that was filled with “real world” scenarios. It was important for instructors to take time out to help learners consider their words, their actions, and their thoughts when posed with a potential social dilemma. Instructors were observed to take advantage of

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the “teachable” moments (i.e., standing in the lunch line, playing at recess, sharing a toy, reading a book together) when possible.

Following a weekly lesson, a learner spontaneously created a story about Bob and Maria. With assistance from her para-educator, her words were added to the illustrations.



This is Bob.

This is Maria.

Bob wants to play games with Maria

They are friends.

For more information about a lesson book filled with Bob and Maria stories please contact Liz at [lizdelsandro@yahoo.com](mailto:lizdelsandro@yahoo.com) or 319-400-7648.

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